



The Mather-Walls House from Moore's Pasture, about 1890.

The Mathers

The new community of Keewatin and its prospects for development excited the imagination of the entire Mather family: John, and sons, David and Robert. All headed west, but it was David L. Mather who took responsibility for directing the operations of the new mill. And on Friday, May 4, 1880, the *Rat Portage North Star* announced: "Mather's new mill commenced to saw on Monday last."

The new town – the boarding houses and residences, the commercial ventures surrounding the new mill, and the first Mather home – was established first on the north shore of Portage Bay, across from Keewatin's present site. Several years later however, in 1889, David L. Mather ventured across the bay to begin construction of a new wood-frame house overlooking the sawmill.

Architectural distinction

Architecturally the new house was a spare and

restrained version of the more florid Queen Anne style so popular in the east. The plans prepared by Winnipeg architect George Browne served as a model for three similar Keewatin dwellings, all of which survive. The first, the 1888 Miller's House and the third, built for David's brother Robert in 1893, have been much altered. Only the house built by David L. Mather in 1889 has survived without significant change.

In common with many other houses of the period, its eclectic elements – wood shingles, horizontal clapboard and vertical board and half-round batten enclosing an asymmetrically disposed volume – were often displayed in consumer's architectural design catalogs and women's magazines, Godey's Ladies Magazine for example, a 19th century precursor of "House and Garden".

A careful examination of the other "Mather" houses, and the 12 semi-detached worker's houses built by the Lake of the Woods Milling Company at that time, will disclose their links to each other and a single design. Individual house elements – the canted corner bay window, for instance – served as stylistic precedent for other houses in the region.



John Walls and a load of timber. Note the timber hook in Mr. Wall's hand.



The Walls family in about 1902. Note the raised wooden sidewalk.

The Walls

In 1893, D. L. Mather, whose involvement in the region was by then increasing, moved to Kenora. After several years during which the house was rented by various families, the foreman of the Keewatin Lumber Co., John Walls and his family, became tenants. In 1906, the Walls family committed itself to the house by purchase.

John Walls, a native of New Brunswick, brought his considerable experience in the lumber trade to Keewatin in 1883 to take up a position as foreman for the Keewatin Lumber Company. Upon the death of John Walls in 1934, the house passed to his daughter, Margaret Edna Walls. She maintained control of the property until 1975. In this period – Miss Walls did not maintain permanent residence in the house, and when she did, lived alone – the property went into a gradual decline. During this span, the outbuildings in the property were taken down. However, by the same token, this minimal though steadfast care provided a period of grace, and of gentle aging. The interior of the house has survived virtually intact.

Ontario Heritage Foundation

In 1975, the Ontario Heritage Foundation acquired the house and contents. The acquisition recognized both the importance of the contribution of the Mather family to a developing Canada – John Mather's initiative eventually led to his assuming the post of president of the Winnipeg Free Press; the mills operated by David L. Mather during his lifetime produced 50 million railway ties; and David's son, William Mather was to become President of the CPR – and the architectural value of this uniquely preserved home and its remarkably unchanged interior.

The Ontario Heritage Foundation was established in 1968 to encourage the conservation of Ontario's cultural heritage. Its resources, derived from public funds and private donations, are used to hold, preserve and restore heritage property, and to aid those engaged in that process. The Foundation is a Crown agency reporting through the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture.

The Foundation under the supervision of the Heritage Branch of the Ministry has carried out a program to return the Mather-Walls House to life and use. A program of investigative research combining the efforts of historians, architects and archaeologists was used to provide a basis for the development of restoration plans.



Archaeological excavation here has exposed wooden plank walls of the privy.

Investigative research

Historical research, carried out by Reg Reeve of the Lake of the Woods Museum has uncovered evidence about the building of the house, and its place within the community. Scores of turn-of-the-century photographs have been used to re-create the property's landscape treatment in the years before World War I.

Archaeological investigation during two seasons' work carried out by the Northwestern Region's archaeological field office (Historical Planning and Research Branch) has provided a wealth of information about the habits and life-styles of all occupants of the house. Their data, when collated with the historical photographs, has allowed the accurate reconstruction of the verandah and early outbuildings surrounding the house.

Architectural research has provided insight into the various factors contributing to late 19th century house design in a north-western Ontario setting and an understanding of the

building's architectural significance.

Future use of the house

In 1978, basic stabilization and repair measures were undertaken to ensure the well-being and security of the house. A second phase of preservation, complete in 1981, has seen the reconstruction of outbuildings and external details, such as the widow's walk and the verandah. As well, a fresh coat of paint has returned the house to its turn-of-the-century chocolate brown and cream. And in 1984, interior restoration has brought the house back to life and use. The Lake of the Woods Historical Society has assumed responsibility for management of the site. The house is being made available to the Society as their headquarters, and placed under the Society's control for use by such other community groups and activities as may be compatible with the long-term preservation of the house.



The Mather-Walls House, approximately 1900. The Walls family is on the verandah.

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Downtown Keewatin in 1889. The entire town burned in 1894 and was rebuilt across Portage Bay on its present site.

All photos courtesy Lake of the Woods Museum, Kenora, Ontario.



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The Mather-Walls House

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In the spring of 1879, construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway had reached Lake of the Woods. But for the relatively small settlements clustered round fur trading posts, the region was largely undeveloped. The need to underlay with cross-ties the advancing rails of the CPR, and the ready availability of virgin forest soon prompted development of the region's first sawmill.

In the summer of 1879, the Keewatin Lumber Company was established: its major shareholder, for 20 years a principal in various Gatineau Hills operations in the Ottawa Valley, was a 50 year old Scotsman named John Mather.



The
Ontario Heritage
Foundation

John White, Chairman